

**PREVIEWS
FOR BETTER OR WORSE
ROMANS 8:26-30
MAY 2, 2021**

They sat in the pastor's office, talking about and planning their wedding.

They wanted to make the ceremony their own,

and so were working with the pastor to customize and personalize the language.

They came to the vows.

He had written down what he thought would be a nice replacement for the traditional words.

"I take you to be my wife, to have and to hold,
from this day forward, to love and to cherish."

The pastor read it again, leaned back in his chair, and asked,

"What about 'for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health'
and 'till death do us part'?"

The groom-to-be said,

"That's such a downer.
We're planning on everything going well.
For better, for richer, and in health.
And in today's world, if things go really bad, you can always get out."

The pastor leaned forward and asked the bride,

"Did you hear that?
How do you feel about that?"

And thus ensued a serious conversation about

what the groom-to-be said,
questions from the bride about what he meant by that,
and the pastor teaching God's design for marriage.

When a husband and wife come together,
the Bible says "the two become one flesh."
Each one is to be *with* the other and *for* the other.
Each one is supposed to *serve* the other.
And that is to be true, *no matter* the circumstances or time span.
The love of husband and wife should be a reflection of how *God* loves.

Then he asked the couple, "Is that something you're ready to sign up for?"

God promises to be with us,

to be **FOR** us,

for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part, and beyond.

Contrary to what some prosperity preachers would have you believe,

there is no guarantee you'll only have the better, the richer, the healthier.

God never promised you a rose garden.

Yes, God promises to answer prayer.

God *did not* promise to answer your prayers the way *you want* them answered.

But God promises to always be *with* us.

And God promises to always be *for* us.

For better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health.

That's what Christian marriage is supposed to model.

God is always with us and always for us.

That is the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

One of the many ways the Spirit works that is in our prayer lives.

Have you ever been stuck in your prayers?

You're not sure what to ask for?

Or how to ask for it?
 I want to pray for what I want,
 but maybe I should seek out God's will first.
 I'm not sure what God's will is.
 I want to pray God's will,
 but I'm just not sure about it.
 Grandpa is ill, really ill.
 At 93 years old, you sort of expect that at some point.
 He's been miserable for weeks,
 and now he's unresponsive.
 You love him so much.
 This has been incredibly hard on him.
 But you don't want to let go.
 Do you pray for a miracle of healing?
 Do you pray for him to go peacefully?
 What do you pray?
 Sometimes it goes so deep it almost physically hurts,
 and you don't have words to express it.

ROMANS 8:26-27

The apostle Paul was pretty sure about most everything.
 When you read his letters you frequently see the words,
 "We know... we are convinced... we are sure."
 But when it comes to prayer???
 This is one of the few times you'll ever read Paul saying "I don't know."
 We don't know how to pray as we ought to.
 "But the Holy Spirit intercedes for us."
 Think about that.
 Who knows the mind of God better than the Spirit of God?
 And the Holy Spirit knows *your* heart and mind,
 even better than you do.
 We are very adept at self-deception.
 But the Holy Spirit sees through that to our true motives and desires.
 So who could pray for us better than the Holy Spirit?
 The Holy Spirit intercedes for us with groans too deep for words.
 What we cannot put into words,
 the Holy Spirit sorts it out and prays the perfect prayer for us.

Seeing the Spirit as an intercessor is not unique to Paul.

In John's Gospel Jesus gave some final teaching to his followers.

Among those chapters he spoke to them about the ministry of the Holy Spirit. (Jn.14-16)

In those chapters Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit with the Greek word "paraclete."

The prefix, para, means "alongside."

A parachurch organization is not a church,
 but works alongside the church.

The paraclete is one who comes alongside us
 to work with us and for us.

It is translated variously as Advocate, Comforter, and Counselor.

And each of those translations conveys some aspect of the meaning of "paraclete."

An advocate is one who pleads for your cause.

They root you on, seeking out the advancement of your case.

A comforter...

We usually think of a nice warm blanket.

But this translation comes from the Old English,

based on the English root word "fort,"
 a strong place of military defense.
 Then there's the translation "Counselor."
 This is not someone sitting across from you asking,
 "How do you feel about that?"
 And how do you feel about the way you feel?"
 This translation keys in on the Counselor being a lawyer,
 your legal representation who stands by your side and argues your case.
 In each translation the idea is that the Holy Spirit is
 God *with* you, God *for* you, God *speaking up* for you.
 The Holy Spirit does that, at least in part, by interceding for us in prayer.
 Imagine that, God is praying for you.
 And, as a preview of part of a future sermon,
 look at Romans 8:34,
 and you'll see that *Jesus* "is also interceding for us."
 So, out of the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
 the Son and the Spirit are both praying for you to the Father.
 And they were both sent to you by the Father.

ROMANS 8:28

What reassuring words.
 And Paul is back to certainty.
 "We know this..."
 "We know that in *ALL* things God works for the good of those who love him."
 For better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health,
 God is *with* you and God is *for* you.
 There is here the affirmation that God *works*.
 This is not the God of deism, watching from on high, but not personally involved.
 This is a God who *intervenes* in his creation;
 he's *actively involved*;
 he makes things *happen*.
 And he works not just in the things we like,
 not just in our victories,
 not just when the sun is shining and the flowers are blooming,
 but also in the darkness and pain of our losses, in our most difficult struggles.
 In the Old Testament we have the story of a troublesome little brother who is "Daddy's favorite"
 who elicited the jealousy and hatred of his older brothers.
 They eventually had enough, conspired, and had him sold off into slavery in Egypt.
 Over time he rose to power in Egypt,
 and a strange turn of events put his brothers under his power.
 They were afraid he'd take revenge on them.
 But he said, "You intended to harm me,
 but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done,
 the saving of many lives." (Ge.50:20)
 Did you hear that?
 God used even *your worst...* to accomplish *his good*.
 When Jesus prayed to be spared the cross, and the answer was "no," (Mk.14:36)
 the Father was working toward something wonderful:
 dealing with our sins once-and-for-all, our salvation.
 And there was good for Jesus' in
 his bodily resurrection,
 his ascension to heaven,
 his exaltation as Lord of all.

God works for good in all things, even in a torturous death.
 When Paul prayed for healing of his "thorn in the flesh,"
 and the answer was "no,"
 God used it to keep Paul a bit more humble, regularly dependent on God,
 and God said,
 "My face is sufficient for you,
 for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2Cor.12:7, 9)
 God used that ailment for Paul's good.
 Early on Easter morning in my first year as a full-time pastor,
 I got a call that a church member had died in the nursing home.
 I'd visited her several times and had gotten to know her.
 So this was quite a blow to me.
 I arrived at the nursing home before the funeral home arrived,
 and prayed with the family while sitting next her body.
 I drove from there to the church to preach resurrection.
 That made me have to dig in and be sure of what I really believed,
 so I could say with Paul, "We know," "We are convinced."
 God worked in even that situation for my good.
 God is incredibly skilled at taking whatever materials life offers up
 and weaving it into a pattern that
 fulfills his ultimate purposes and *blesses us* along the way.
 And God promises to work for *your* good... in *all* things.
 But notice, too, it is "for the good of those who love him."
 It's not necessarily true for everyone.
 This is not a sunny smile optimism that "everything will turn out OK for everyone."
 This is an affirmation based on your relationship with God.
 It is true for everyone who loves him.
 He works for your good.

ROMANS 8:28-30

Those who have been called,
 "those God foreknew... those he also predestined... those he justified... those he glorified."
 That may sound like word salad.
 So let's take it one step at a time.
 Those whom God foreknew.
 It's a non-controversial belief that God knows what's going to happen before it happens.
 Theologically speaking, God exists not just in our time-space continuum,
 but also transcends it.
 So somehow past, present and future are all present to him.
 It's like when movies were printed on a reel of film.
 If you had access to the reel,
 you could see any and every frame and sequence of the movie.
 All of time, from the beginning to the end,
 and every moment of *your life*, from birth to death,
 is accessible to God in just that way.
 Those whom God foreknew...
 More controversial is the next piece.
 "Those whom God predestined..."
 Predestination is controversial because if God predestined some for salvation,
 that necessarily means God also chose to leave some out.
 God chose who goes to heaven AND who goes to hell.
 And that leaves a bad taste in the mouth of many people.
 Predestination is also controversial because

we all have some *personal experience* of making choices,
exercising free will.

And the Bible itself includes calls for people *to make a choice* for or against God,
like when Joshua faced the people of Israel and said,

“If serving the LORD seems undesirable to you,
then *choose* for yourselves this day whom you will serve,
whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates,
or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living.
But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” (Jo.24:15)

And that ability to choose seems to fly in the face of predestination.

Predestination is controversial because

many verses of Bible suggest God wants *all* people to be saved, not just some.

“John (the Baptist) saw Jesus coming toward him and said,

‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the *world!*’” (Jn.1:29)

Then there’s John 3:16:

“For God so loved the *world* that he gave his one and only Son,
that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (Jn.3:16)

Paul wrote to a young pastor named Timothy of

“...God our Savior, who *wants all* people to be saved
and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

For there is one God and one mediator between God and humanity,
the man Christ Jesus,
who gave himself as a ransom for *all* people.” (1Tim.2:3-6)

Peter wrote,

“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness.
Instead he is patient with you,
not wanting *anyone* to perish,
but *everyone* to come to repentance.” (2Pe.3:9)

And John wrote in one of his letters,

“He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins,
and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” (1Jn.2:2)

All those verses and others presume God wants *all* people to be saved,
and in Christ has done for them all that is necessary.

The only thing lacking is the response of faith, their *choosing*.

And yet... the word *and the meaning* of predestination are clearly present in the Bible,
Old Testament and New.

And the word clearly means God determined it, decided it, beforehand.

The word is used twice in Romans 8 and twice in Paul’s letter to the church in Ephesus.

The *idea* is widespread in the Bible.

Both the Old and New Testaments affirm that

God is sovereign over all creation,
somehow in charge of it all, deciding how events will play out,
King of kings and Lord of lords.

Both ideas, human choice and God’s sovereignty, are present in the Bible.

Somehow God chooses the individual,

and the individual chooses faith in God.

It’s a multi-dimensional thing that is hard, perhaps impossible, to fully grasp.

Notice, too, that God “predestined” some “to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.”

Not just predestined to be saved and go to heaven,

but predestined *to be conformed to the likeness of his Son*.

God’s goal is not just getting us on the up elevator *after death*.

He wants us on that elevator *in this life*,

growing spiritually closer to Christ and becoming *more like* Christ.

This is the process of sanctification.

It comes from the Latin term, “sanctus,” which means “holy.”

Are you becoming more holy? More Christ-like?

“Those he predestined he called.”

He called.

Called to what?

Paul does not specify.

As followers of Jesus, we were *called* into the family of God.

We are all called *to serve* in some form of ministry.

We are called to *worship* God.

We are called by God... to all sorts of things.

“Those he called, he also justified.”

Justified.

You and I stand before the divine Judge,

which happens to be Jesus himself, (Thank God for that!)

and, because of what he accomplished, he declares us to be justified.

Finally, Paul says, “Those he justified, he also glorified.”

Glorified.

There’s an expansive word of promise!

This is where the process of our salvation,

from justification to sanctification,

is finally brought to its conclusion in glorification.

John expressed it this way in his first letter:

“Dear friends, now we are children of God,

and what we will be has not yet been made known.

But we know that when Christ appears,

we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

(1Jn.3:2)

In the fullness of the kingdom of God we shall be like Jesus in character and spirit.

Because we see him as he is, person-to-person.

But while we are in this life,

and short of glorification,

we are still called and empowered to be in the process of sanctification,

being conformed more and more into the image of Christ.

Grow, grow, grow, no matter the circumstances.

Our engaged couple sitting in the pastor’s office had a decision to make.

They made the decision, met each other at the front of the church, and said,

“I do. For better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health,
till death do us part.”

Oh, they had no idea what they were getting themselves into.

Over the years they would experience both sides of each of those:

better or worse, richer or poorer, sickness and health.

Sometimes it was more painful and difficult than they could ever have imagined.

Sometimes it brought joy, happiness, and fulfillment.

But no matter where they were, in the highs or the lows,

they remembered, “Till death do us part.”

On their 50th anniversary they had dinner with their children and grandchildren.

One of the grandkids asked,

“50 years is forever!

How’d you do it?

What was your secret?”

Grandma answered,

“We promised ‘till death do us part,’

so I knew I couldn’t divorce him,

and he knew he couldn’t divorce me.

Then I remember Billy Graham’s wife Ruth once said
she’d never considered divorce.

Murder, maybe, but not divorce.

But then God said, ‘Thou shalt not kill.’

So we just decided we'd take our pastor's challenge,
and try to love each other the way God loves us.
For better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health,
'in all things God works for our good.'
So we work for each other's good... in all things.

That's how God loves you.

Will you reflect him in how you love others?